

Protection measures against Antarctica's tourist invasion

Australia is leading the initiative to control the impact of rapidly increasing Antarctic tourism, and to ensure that operators are properly regulated.

At a special Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting of Experts in Norway during March, an Australian delegation led by the Australian Antarctic Division presented Australia's vision for an Antarctic tourism policy.

Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment and Heritage, Dr Sharman Stone said, 'Over the past decade tourist visits to Antarctica have doubled and tourist vessels operating in Antarctica have increased from 12 to 47.'

'There is every indication that this interest in Antarctica will continue to grow. We must make sure we do not destroy the world's last great wilderness.'

According to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators (IAATO), the number of ship-based tourists visiting Antarctica has grown from 6704 in 1992–93 to 13 263 in 2002–03. IAATO has estimated the number of ship-based tourists landing in Antarctica was over 20 000, last season.

While the Antarctic continent is as large as Australia, tourism is concentrated in small areas, for example on the Antarctic Peninsula close to South America.

At the Norway meeting, Australia argued for the following to be put in place:

- An **accreditation scheme** to encourage adherence to voluntary guidelines and codes of behaviour by all tourist expeditions;
- An **environmental monitoring** framework capable of identifying both



Graham Blight

No matter what measures are taken, tourist volume will inevitably have an impact on the pristine Antarctic environment. How should this be managed?

- short-term and cumulative impacts arising from tourism activities;
- **Activity guidelines** addressing environmental and safety issues which will assist in the planning and conduct of activities commonly undertaken by tourists to ensure that such activities have no more than a minor or transitory environmental impact and are conducted in a safe and responsible manner;
- A **site management system** incorporating site-specific guidelines to identify and put in place management controls for sites identified as being at risk;
- An **Antarctic shipping code** for consideration by the International Maritime Organization to encourage appropriate environmental and safety standards for commercial shipping in the Antarctic Treaty area;
- A coordinated **inspection/observer** scheme to audit compliance with regulatory and voluntary measures governing tourism activities;

- Effective **quarantine** procedures to prevent the introduction and spread of exotic species in the Antarctic environment;
- A **database** on tourism activities to assist in the management of these activities; and
- A **financial security system** that requires all tourism activities to carry adequate insurance, provide a bond or otherwise indemnify or reimburse others against the cost of support provided in the event of accidents or an emergency.

Currently Australian nationals and Australian registered companies intending to conduct tourism operations in Antarctica are required to notify the Australian Antarctic Division and undertake an environmental impact assessment. Depending on the activity, they may also then be required to have adequate insurance and contingency plans for search and rescue.

Ningaloo Marine Park expanded

The Federal Government announced in March an increase to boundaries of Western Australia's Ningaloo Marine Park by 259 square kilometres, approximately 12 per cent of the total area, to include two expired petroleum leases.

Minister for the Environment and Heritage, Dr David Kemp, said, 'Incorporating these two areas will ensure the whole of the deep water environment

fringing the reef is protected...'

Ningaloo Marine Park (Commonwealth waters) stretches for approximately 260 km from just below the Tropic of Capricorn at Amherst Point, to just north of North West Cape off WA.

The Marine Park, including Ningaloo Reef in State waters, provides unique habitat for a diverse range of marine species.

'The Marine Park is noted for its large marine fauna

including seasonal aggregations of the world's largest fish, the whale shark; the large pelagic fish including tuna and billfish; whales and dolphins; marine turtles; and dugongs,' Dr Kemp said. Over 200 species of coral, 600 species of mollusc and 500 species of fish have been recorded.

'It is also visited regularly by migratory birds listed on international agreements to which Australia is a signatory and has a willing obligation to protect.'



Robert Kerton/Science Image Online

The short-beaked common dolphin is a spectacular Ningaloo visitor.